

## Surviving Another Hot, Dry Summer

As I was standing out in the afternoon sunshine (Don't ask why I didn't do this in the early morning!) using the last of my rainwater supply to try to keep our trees and shrubs from wilting, it occurred to me that this was an annual battle to keep everything we want to grow alive and well while at the same time not using too much of our scarce natural resource.

It also occurred to me that there are a lot of things landowners can do to help their trees, shrubs and perennials survive another summer while also keeping an eye on the amount of water we use. Here are some thoughts.

The first thought is that we have to get into our heads that this is going to be an ongoing struggle for the foreseeable future, as it is not going to get any cooler and we are not going to have any more water, at least not on a long-term basis.

Since most of the water used by the average homeowner for at least six months a year is for lawn care, the lawn is the first place to concentrate one's effort. Many people have concluded that trying to keep a large, water-hungry, introduced-grass lawn looking picture-book perfect is not only a losing battle, but perhaps one that we should not be trying to win. Greatly reducing the size of the lawn and replacing St Augustine or even bermudagrass with some of the newer native grass mixtures of buffalograss will save a lot of water. Mowing infrequently and at a high mower setting and leaving the clippings on the lawn are all water- and time-saving practices as well. If the lawn ain't growing, don't be mowing!

Installing drip irrigation on all flower beds and around shrubs is the most efficient way to water these plants. Sprinkler systems of all kinds are the least efficient as much of the water evaporates before it even reaches the plants, or blows off in the wind, or just wets the leaves or mulch, none of which helps the plants at all.

The most dependable drip systems utilize what are often referred to as "in-line emitter" tubing, 1/2 inch or 1/4 inch plastic tubing with built in emitters every several inches. How the tubing is laid out in the beds, in terms of how close together the tubing is as well as how close to the individual plants is important, but the systems allow for a lot of flexibility in this regard. Trees should be watered to a depth of 6 inches so that a 6 inch screwdriver can be pushed in all the way. Ideally, one would want the drip tubing to be under mulch.

One of the biggest mistakes many people make in laying out drip tubing around trees and shrubs is running the tubing too close to the trunks. Trees and most shrubs have most of their feeder roots at least as far out from the trunk as the outer limbs are, so that is where most of the drip tubing should be.

Mulch is critically important. The temperature of bare soil can be 20 to 40 degrees hotter than the soil under mulch and that causes much of the water in the soil to evaporate and kills soil organisms as well. Many people recommend 3 or 4 inches of mulch. My personal opinion is that two inches are optimal. More mulch won't keep the soil much cooler, but it will intercept water from rain or sprinklers thus preventing some of the water from reaching the soil.

Plant selection and location have a lot to do with the success of plants surviving the summer. In general, and there are obvious exceptions, plants that grow predominately east of here require more water and plants that grow west of here require less water. Plants that you see growing natively (not planted by anyone) in areas similar to your location are your best bet.

Most perennials, small shrubs and vines can grow in at least partial shade and will do much better when planted under trees than when planted where they are exposed to full western or southern sunlight.

Finally, you will always have a few things that require some hand watering on the hottest days. That is OK, it gives you a chance to get out and enjoy your yard—but don't wait until mid-afternoon like I did.

Until next time...

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